



Chapter 7

Best Practice *in* Social Studies

Debra Henderson's seventh- and eighth-grade social studies classes at Clissold School on Chicago's far South Side love their projects. Having finished one on Chicago's high-profile mayoral race as the election itself ended, they launched into another—on protest movements in the Middle East. Although the historic upheavals in that region were filling the news headlines, Debra knew her kids would have little idea about the countries or the causes for their turmoil. But she also knew that a research project on these dramatic events offered a great opportunity to help students acquire important social studies knowledge, concepts, and skills. They'd explore geography, learn about other cultures, hone investigative skills, and do some good subject-area reading.

Debra organized the kids into inquiry groups (very much like those described in Harvey's and Daniels' *Comprehension and Collaboration*) (2009) each focused on a country of their choice—Algeria, Egypt, Tunisia, Libya, or Tunisia. Students also selected roles within their groups—discussion director, word interpreter, camera specialist, fact finder, FBI agent (i.e., investigator about important people). She provided news summaries, put up chart paper, and handed out sticky notes and laptops from the computer cart. By the late winter date of this project, the kids were completely

accustomed to their small-group inquiry process and got right to work. Camera specialists searched on the web for pictures of important political figures as well as geographic features of their country. The FBI agents looked on the web for information about those people. Fact finders catalogued basic data about their countries. Word interpreters checked out definitions and usage of vocabulary found in the news articles—*escalation, defection, besieged, brainwashing, monsoon, corruption*—and entered them into a vocabulary file box and onto the class word wall. Discussion directors read and searched along with the others, and then identified the big, critical questions that the group needed to debate before reaching final conclusions.

As kids worked in country-centered teams, Debra rotated around the room, coaching, especially some of the students with special needs she knew might struggle. After time on research, each group added sticky notes about their country onto posters hung along one wall. Then Debra jigsawed everyone, grouping all the students with the same role together to compare their countries. Finally, every student wrote a short summary of all that he or she had learned about a country. Once the summaries were finished and added to their posters, everyone studied the posters to learn about each other's countries in more depth.

Clissold social studies classes are scheduled so each grade-level meets for a double period for five weeks, and then cycles off for five. This provides the extended work time Debra needs for her in-depth projects without detracting from other subjects. A smart strategy, just when we might have doubted there was any way to get more flexibility out of a school schedule.

Debra also feels fortunate to have obtained an endorsement in reading, so she comes to social studies armed with a great repertoire of teaching strategies. She herself had difficulties learning to read as a child but was mentored by a teacher neighbor who, took Debra under her wing. Debra not only introduces reading strategies in her social studies classes but also talks with the students about how they're applying these in other courses. She also earned an administrative certificate—not to become a principal, she says, but to gain a wider perspective on the work of education. It's from teachers like Debra Henderson that we've learned about many of the principles that we'll outline in this chapter—studying topics in depth, having students exercise choice and responsibility, inviting them to think and explore, promoting both individual and cooperative learning, connecting learning to the real world.

What standards do Debra Henderson and her fellow social studies teachers at Clissold School follow? Interestingly, she balances the Illinois state standards with standards and project ideas from the humanities portion of the International Baccalaureate Middle Years program. The humanities materials in this program are actually quite applicable to any middle school classroom,

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and provide excellent in-depth study projects that would be engaging for any middle school students. They feature interdisciplinary learning, a wide range of resources, and what the program calls "international-mindedness." Fundamental concepts in the program: intercultural awareness, holistic learning, and communication. It's worth keeping these in mind as we survey the various standards for social studies currently in use.

A LOOK AT SOCIAL STUDIES STANDARDS

The history of social studies standards is a checkered one. In 1994 the National Center for History in the Schools published a set of history standards, perhaps the first for this field. It was forward-looking and promoted thinking and active student participation, along with essential factual knowledge. The document was intensely attacked by the far right as "anti-American," however, especially because it dwelt too much, in the critics' view, on the decimation of Native American populations and other dark aspects of American history. The document was actually condemned by the U.S. Senate in 1996 just as a revised edition was being issued, after which it faded from view. Around the same time, the National Council for the Social Studies (NCSS) developed and published *Expectations of Excellence: Curriculum Standards for Social Studies* in 1994 and followed up with *National Standards for Social Studies Teachers* in 1997 (updated in 2007). The NCSS approach was highly conceptual but less controversial, and perhaps just less noticed. It emphasized ten thematic strands:

- Culture
- Time, Continuity, and Change
- People, Places, and Environments
- Individual Development and Identity
- Individuals, Groups, and Institutions
- Power, Authority, and Governance
- Production, Distribution, and Consumption
- Science, Technology, and Society
- Global Connections
- Civic Ideals and Practices

The document outlines four perspectives for approaching these themes: personal, academic, pluralist, and global. Four learning skills are called for: (1) acquiring information and manipulating data; (2) developing and presenting policies, arguments, and stories; (3) constructing new knowledge; and (4) par-

ticipating in groups. The authors then list principles for teaching and learning intended to make social studies meaningful, integrative, value-based, challenging, and active. Clearly, the NCSS aimed to make social studies engaging for students, central to the development of citizenship, and focused on higher-level thinking.

Thirteen years later these standards have been revised, maintaining the same ten thematic categories and skills, but offering a sharper focus, adding the following curricular elements:

- Purposes
- Questions for exploration
- Knowledge: what learners need to understand
- Processes: what learners will be capable of doing
- Products: how learners demonstrate understanding

At the same time, the NCSS has collaborated on a very different kind of standards project with a whole new twist, working with the Partnership for 21st Century Skills and a number of other education organizations. Founded in 2002 by a group of major communications and computer businesses, this effort has been endorsed by fourteen states, though it's not clear that they've actually incorporated the guidelines into their standards. Along with knowledge in core subjects like English, math, science, and history, the 21st Century Skills focus on "Four Cs:"

- Critical thinking and problem solving
- Communication
- Collaboration
- Creativity and innovation

Also stressed are media and technology skills, which tend to be just barely mentioned in most state and national standards. And compared to the fairly traditional approaches to learning in so many of the state and national standards, these are focused on what leading businesspeople believe are the skills Americans will need to be successful and thoughtful as workers and citizens—skills that are also needed to keep companies globally competitive. Some educators are wary of this business-backed movement, fearing that its main intention is to pawn its own job-training costs off on the public schools. Decide for yourself, but learn more at www.p21.org. All things considered, the 2010 NCSS standards plus some version of 21st Century Skills probably make the best guides available for meaningful social studies teaching and learning to date.

Actually, the Common Core State Standards do include social studies and science in the reading and writing standards, though mainly to emphasize the importance of literacy in the study of these subjects. And now a group of states

and professional teachers' organizations have been meeting to begin developing a new set of social studies standards and are working on a conceptual framework for it. In January 2010, NCSS and the Civic Mission of Schools (CMS) convened a meeting of national organizations in civics, economics, geography, and history to discuss working together on common social studies standards. They agreed on a common definition of social studies that includes the individual disciplines and the "literacies" outlined by the Partnership for 21st Century Skills, stating, "The social studies is an interdisciplinary exploration of the social sciences and humanities, including civics, history, economics, and geography in order to develop responsible, informed and engaged citizens and to foster civic, global, historical, geographic, and economic literacy" (*National Council for the Social Studies*, 2010).

In October 2010, a coalition of fifteen states and fifteen professional organizations met to begin exploring the development of common state standards in social studies. These groups convened again in February 2011 to work on a conceptual framework and criteria for the standards. Eighteen states are now involved. There will be more to come, obviously, and so we will all need to watch and see whether this new initiative brings us still better and more thoughtful guidance.

Meanwhile, states have, over the years, developed their own social studies standards, curriculum guidelines, and tests, though all, including the NCSS standards, are thoroughly overshadowed by the national focus on literacy and math—overshadowed despite the assertion in the preambles of many of the documents that citizens' knowledge of history and civic responsibility are essential to a functioning democracy. So now we take a quick look at a few individual states' standards. Perhaps in these examples, you'll recognize some features (or pitfalls) of your own state's approach to social studies.

California. The California standards in social studies consist of three components published by the California Department of Education:

1. a document called *History–Social Science Framework for California Public Schools, Kindergarten Through Grade Twelve* (updated 2001a)
2. *History–Social Science Content Standards* (2001b), which lists the expectations for each grade
3. the social science portions of the California Standards Tests (2009)

The *Framework* is an extremely ambitious document that presents broad principles and outlines coursework for each grade level. It begins with a set of seventeen principles that set very high, laudable aims for content knowledge, development of citizenship, active application of learning, and in-depth thinking. Many sound similar to those provided by the NCSS, though the *Framework* is so

sharply centered on the chronological study of history that other social studies areas are pushed to the side. Some of the key principles, briefly (California Department of Education 2001a, 4–8):

- History should be viewed "as a story well told."
- The study of history should be enriched with literature, "both literature of the period and literature *about* the period."
- A richer and broader curriculum (than has been customary) is needed for the early grades (K–3).
- Major historical events and periods should be studied "in depth as opposed to superficial skimming of enormous amounts of material."
- A multicultural perspective should be incorporated throughout the social studies curriculum.
- "Ethical understanding and civic virtue" should guide thinking about public affairs.
- Civic and democratic values should be developed "as an integral element of good citizenship."
- Teachers should "present controversial issues honestly and accurately within their historical or contemporary context."
- Critical thinking skills should "be included at every grade level."
- A variety of content-appropriate teaching methods must be supported to "engage students actively in the learning process."
- Students should participate "in school and community service programs and activities."

A noble and thoughtful set of goals. The *Framework* goes on to elaborate these in terms of broad ideas, critical thinking, and students' personal development.

If only California had just stopped right there! The actual standards are composed entirely of lists of historic events, people, and social developments. Sixth grade, for example, must cover prehistoric development, Egypt and Mesopotamia, ancient Hebrews, ancient Greece, ancient India, early Chinese civilization, and ancient Rome. Considering the limited time available during the year, this becomes the very "forced march across many centuries and continents" that the *Framework* specifically warns against.

The sixth-grade curriculum, for example, does meet some larger aims of the *Framework*. It's multicultural. It allows for integrating other social sciences—archaeology, geography, political science, comparative religion. It's open to critical thinking and a variety of teaching methods. But it doesn't address students' active participation in school or community service, or real-world application of democratic values, items that do not appear until high school senior year.

The picture gets still more troubling when we look at the tests (California Department of Education 2009). Social science is not tested until eighth grade,

but that test covers material from all three middle school grades. And the questions are almost entirely focused on factual recall. Questions released from the 2003–2008 history–social science tests, for example, ask about the topic of a speech by Horace Greeley, the source through which papermaking was introduced to Europe, and the geographic center of Incan civilization. One sample question: “What was the main contribution of Emperor Shi Haungdi to China?” OK, well-educated adult readers, answer that one without Googling it first. (So, we looked, and he was indeed important—the first ruler to unify China, who in the process started the Great Wall and commissioned the famous Terracotta Warriors for his tomb. But how many competent college grads know this?) Some questions can be answered by logical guessing. But thinking skills, citizenship, exploration of controversial issues as called for in the *Framework*? Gone. Caring “deeply about the quality of life in their community, their nation, and their world”? Not a hint.

So what can a California teacher do to prepare students for such questions? Obviously, memorizing Emperor Shi Haungdi’s accomplishments won’t work—that question won’t reappear on the next year’s test. Instead, wide reading and memorable in-depth study projects (like the one we saw in Debra Henderson’s eighth-grade class), in the spirit of the *Framework* introduction, will prepare kids to deal with questions intelligently, whatever is thrown at them.

Pennsylvania. This state offers a fascinating alternative. The Pennsylvania Board of Education’s “Education Hub” website includes a section called the “standards aligned system” (the URL is a long one, so search for “Pennsylvania social studies standards” to get to the full program). Social studies are divided into four areas—civics, economics, geography, and history—with major subtopics for each. Click on a subtopic to get to a page where you select a grade level and see a series of buttons:

- Clear Standards
- Fair Assessments
- Curriculum Framework
- Instruction
- Materials & Resources
- Interventions

The actual standards for U.S. history include few lists of events or places or names, but instead ask students to analyze broad historical patterns, such as social class differences, women’s rights, or immigration. The subitems under “Curriculum Framework” include Big Ideas, Concepts, Competencies, Essential Questions, Vocabulary, and Exemplars. And while some other educational mate-

rials list mere topic headings as if they were “essential questions,” this document does a creditable job when actual questions are posed. One of the questions under U.S. history for ninth graders, for example: “How can the story of another American, past or present, influence your life?” This system clearly aims for larger learning goals, rather than simply lists of names and dates to memorize.

South Carolina. The South Carolina standards for the most part offer the usual march of topics, requiring students to “summarize,” “explain,” or “compare” various events, historical developments, people, concepts. However, appended to each document is a set of tables that organize the various kinds of material to be taught according to a revised version of Bloom’s Taxonomy—so that teachers are advised to engage students in the full range of thinking activities, from distinguishing important elements to critiquing, to inventing new ways to solve a problem. Another appendix lists the types of social studies “literacies” that students should learn. Most of these are procedural—creating and using time lines and maps, for example. However, several call for more student initiative and deeper thought (South Carolina Department of Education 2005):

- Demonstrate responsible citizenship within the school community and the local and national communities.
- Use texts, photographs, and documents to observe and interpret social studies trends and relationships.

Teachers and district curriculum coordinators should be sure to read all the way to the end of these documents. There they may find, tucked away in appendices like those for South Carolina, support for the thinking skills, active learning, and preparation for citizenship that were initially announced as the real objectives for social studies instruction.



We could continue with more states, but the story is usually similar—dry lists of facts to learn, juxtaposed on occasion with higher-level goals and thinking skills. Wherever teachers face standards that require them to “cover” interminable lists of topics, we need to recognize that students won’t learn much from just marching through the items. Anyway, preparing students for specific items that just might be on the state test will be hit or miss. Instead, students need to read widely and deeply. And in-depth inquiry activities will help them make meaning from the information they encounter. That way, they’ll remember the material because it’s part of something larger, something important. It’s easy to panic when you see a long list of content items or a parade of factual test questions from previous years. But smart teachers know that the larger principles outlined

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in documents like the introduction to the California *Framework* are good ones, and if we stick to them, our kids will do just fine. We needn't let a weak standards design derail us from good teaching.

QUALITIES OF BEST PRACTICE IN TEACHING SOCIAL STUDIES

Whatever set of state standards or new common standards teachers may be aiming to meet, the following qualities of instructional practice will lead students toward achieving them.

Provide regular opportunities to investigate social studies topics in depth. Complete "coverage" in social studies inevitably results in superficial and unengaging teaching, like painting a room—covering plenty of square feet but only one-thousandth of an inch thick. That's certainly not what we saw in Debra Henderson's Middle East Protest Movements project. All the national reports and even some state standards recognize that real learning involves in-depth understanding of the complexities of human existence. The *National Curriculum Standards for Social Studies* highlights this need:

Key concepts and themes are developed in depth. The most effective teachers do not diffuse their efforts by covering too many topics superficially. Breadth is important, but deep and thoughtful understanding is essential to prepare students for the issues of twenty-first century citizenship. (NCSS 2010, 170)

Yet with so many social studies fields—history, geography, sociology, anthropology, psychology—each including many topics, teachers must accept that under either approach—thin coverage on everything or depth for a few areas—students won't learn it all in twelve years of school. Covering less in more depth, however, not only ensures better understanding but increases the likelihood that students will learn how social scientists *think*, and entices them to pursue further inquiry on their own.

Create opportunities for students to exercise choice and responsibility for their own inquiry topics. Particularly because learning in social studies is meant to prepare students for *democratic* citizenship, student initiative is necessary in the classroom. It sends a mixed message to *talk* about making intelligent choices as a citizen but never to allow kids to practice doing so. Debra Henderson at Clissold School clearly understood this when she let her students choose which country

to study and which roles to play in their groups. But student choice need not mean chaos or avoidance of important content. Good teachers provide lists of significant topics, give mini-lessons on how to thoughtfully choose a topic for writing or a research project, and conduct brief individual conferences to give students guidance. This not only increases engagement, but teaches an important skill needed for research projects in the upper grades and college—how to judiciously choose topics for meaningful reports and papers.

Choice allows for differentiation, which is at the core of implementing Response to Intervention (RTI) in the classroom. Once students' particular needs are identified, the teacher can use brief individual student conferences to help students choose inquiry topics and readings that are at their specific developmental levels. Choice is also especially valuable for English language learners, enabling them to draw on and share specific cultural and geographic knowledge that other students in the class may not possess.

Explore open questions that challenge students' thinking. Any study of human social existence brings up meaningful and often controversial questions—the pull between community and individual freedoms, abundance and scarcity of resources, particularity of local regions versus interrelatedness in a larger world. Ask questions that invite discussion, rather than merely check for memorized facts. Then help students to examine both problematic and positive historical events honestly and to analyze their meaning.

This open approach requires effective management of small-group learning. Assigning brief learning-log entries and small-group tasks prepares students to contribute to class discussion. Climate-setting activities are also essential, helping students respect one another's opinions and trust that their ideas will not be ridiculed (see Chapter 2). After a good discussion, students' follow-up journal entries, reports, and wall charts—or at the very least, end-of-class reflections—solidify learning so ideas do not evaporate when class is over.

Yes, but . . . how can a teacher find time to prepare if individuals or groups of students are working on different issues?

Planning projects around exploration of large, open questions requires some work. But increasingly, fascinating and useful units and inquiry projects are available on the Internet. "History Lab" at <http://hlab.tielab.org>, for example (run by the Technology in Education Laboratory), features projects using primary sources, which are themselves viewable online. "Best of History Websites" (www.besthistorysites.net) can connect teachers to hundreds of web resources—but it's well organized so a teacher or student needn't be overwhelmed with information. A thematic approach,

as outlined in Tarry Lindquist's *Seeing the Whole Through Social Studies* (2002), makes student participation easier to include in the curriculum. Many strategies are described in Janet Alleman and Jere Brophy's set of three books, *Social Studies Excursions, K-3* (2001-2003), and Laurel Schmidt's *Social Studies That Sticks: How to Bring Content and Concepts to Life* (2007). When teachers teach with themes, they find that many of the items in their social studies curriculum guides are automatically covered.

To make concepts real, promote students' active participation in the classroom and the wider community. Real-world involvement is crucial for imparting the values of civic involvement and responsibility in our society. Our colleague, the noted reading educator Stephanie Harvey (2011), simply says that the final stage of reading comprehension is *taking action*—that kids haven't fully understood a text until they carry out some behavior that shows what knowledge they have built. That may mean something as subtle as internally changing an attitude, explaining an issue to others, or continuing to investigate a topic—or it may be as outward and concrete as raising money to save endangered species or petitioning for an important environmental improvement around school. The best of the standards documents and research studies emphasize such real-life connections and investigations, collaborative learning, and increased individual responsibility for learning. In spite of overstuffed curriculum guides, the task need not be overwhelming. Aspects of sociology, economics, and politics can always be found right in the school building. Children of most ages can debate an issue, draft letters and proposals, propose changes in classroom procedures, or set up committees to accomplish some new goal. Student participation in these matters will, as an additional benefit, contribute to the social health of the school (Apple and Beane 2007). Active involvement can easily reach outside the school walls as well. Representatives of many social and governmental organizations happily visit classrooms. Parents who work in relevant fields are great resources. Genuine responses from community leaders to students' letters, proposals on community projects, and real advocacy are long remembered by students. And they are especially motivating for students who may be struggling academically or who feel culturally marginalized in the classroom.

Involve students in both independent inquiry and collaborative learning. To build skills and habits for lifelong, responsible learning, students must learn how to work with others. Inexperienced kids will need training to use collaborative learning well, but this in itself is an important skill for use in school as well as their adult lives, as the 21st Century Skills site points out. At the same time, it is wise to balance individual and group work, since students need their own time for processing new ideas. A classroom workshop structure, in which students

research individually chosen topics while the teacher holds brief one-to-one conferences, is a highly efficient way of immersing children in such individual study. These two organizational structures—collaborative groups and classroom workshop—are also essential tools for making a heterogeneous classroom work to serve students at many different achievement levels, as individual student needs are identified through RTI assessments (see Chapter 2 for descriptions of collaborative groups and classroom workshop).

Include reading of a variety of engaging, real-world documents, not just textbooks. Textbooks present many limitations for effective learning. They are difficult to read, stuffed with facts but lacking exploration of concepts in any depth. They're boring. And especially problematic, they generally present just one view of events, compared with the many intense and engaging controversies that surround so many social studies topics. Primary sources, in contrast, bring history to life. Articles from newspapers, magazines, and collections on the Internet abound, and since various publications aim at differing complexity levels, a teacher can choose a range of options to meet students' needs. An excellent example of quality reading is *Making Freedom: African Americans in U.S. History* (Primary Source 2004), a five-volume set of primary documents and materials. Websites on this topic, such as "In Motion: The African American Migration Experience" (www.inmotionaame.org) make still more resources available. The reading of images that are connected to various significant topics can add still another dimension to students' thinking and literacy, and can reach students who might otherwise not become engaged in the material. This can be a great tool for supporting the learning of special education students as well. To ensure that kids become lifelong readers, able to evaluate many points of view on topics important to their lives, we must get them well into the habit of reading widely in school.

Engage students in writing, observing, discussing, and debating activities to ensure they internalize important ideas that are new to them. Teachers often picture writing, discussion, or group work as time-consuming add-ons. We imagine essays that take days for kids to write and nights for us to grade. But activities can be brief and informal—taking only moments to help individual students focus, consider a problem, or reflect on the material. Students can write for two minutes at the beginning of the period to recollect main points covered the day before. They can stop in the middle of the class to talk for two minutes in pairs or threes about solutions to a problem. At the end of class, they can reflect on a note card about what they've learned or don't understand. The Common Core Speaking and Listening standards explicitly call for students to frequently engage in just such whole-class and peer group discussions.

Writing, drawing, and other forms of expression help students create new understandings for themselves. As the *National Curriculum Standards for Social Studies* describes its vision for an active classroom:

Active lessons require students to process and think about what they are learning. There is a profound difference between learning about the actions and conclusions of others and reasoning one's way toward those conclusions. Active learning is not just "hands-on," it is "minds-on." . . . Powerful social studies teachers develop and/or expand repertoires of engaging, thoughtful teaching strategies for lessons that allow students to analyze content in a variety of learning modes. (NCSS 2010, 171)

Build social studies learning on students' prior knowledge of their lives and communities, rather than assuming they know nothing about the subject. News reporters love to bash kids and education by recounting the geography or history bloopers written on quizzes. Yet children listen far more closely to adult conversation than we like to acknowledge, and they sense issues and paradoxes in their community, school, and families much more sharply than we realize. By drawing out and building on this prior knowledge, we show how social studies concepts are relevant to children's lives, and not just abstract words.

This is especially important for English language learners, who can easily experience a wide gap between the world of school and their home lives. Drawing on students' knowledge about their own cultures not only strengthens this connection between home and school; it also helps students to learn academic concepts because it provides them with concrete examples that enable them to grasp the more school-oriented materials; for example, when history teacher Andy Pascarella (whom we will read about at the end of this chapter) teaches his students about drawing inferences from, and evaluating the limitations of, evidence, he starts by asking them to write about objects in their own homes and what an outsider might think they reveal about the kids' lives.

Of course, students grasp more complexities as they move up the grades and grow more aware of the wider world and social interactions around them. Traditional social studies curricula have followed an "expanding environments" formula for elementary grades, starting with the family and working outward. More recently, however, educators have found ways to introduce young children more effectively to history, geography, and other topics by connecting their own experience with the larger social studies themes, thus building more of a knowledge base, but in a meaningful way. Janet Alleman and Jere Brophy's book set, *Social Studies Excursions, K-3* (2001-2003), and *Doing History: Investigating with Children in Elementary and Middle Schools*, Fourth Edition by Linda Levstik and

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Keith Barton (2010), provide detailed guidance for elementary and middle school teachers to involve children in active historical inquiry.

Help students explore the full variety of cultures found in America, including their own backgrounds as well as others'. The acrimonious debate over "our common heritage" versus study of individual ethnic groups has sadly obscured much of the real value in both these perspectives. First, minority children are not the only ones who have been cut off from their own history. Most students in any age group or social stratum know little of the historical and political developments that affected their families and forebears. History, politics, economics, culture, folklore—all become more meaningful to students through interviews with parents, grandparents, neighbors, and other adults (Zemelman et al. 2000).

Nevertheless, children of minority backgrounds in particular tend to see school as disconnected from their own lives. English language learners especially need both to value and understand more about their own heritage in order to feel confirmed as members of the larger community. However, once we've helped them connect school subjects like history with their own lives, students are eager to learn about other cultural groups and appreciate both their rich particularity and their common struggles and aspirations. Far from engendering divisiveness, this approach helps eradicate it.

What is crucial is *how* these things are studied. We've observed children endure profound boredom when required to memorize the principal grain crops of African countries. Such activities do not connect children with history but further alienate them. In contrast, when students make choices, discover facts that they find significant in their own family backgrounds, and share them with mutual respect, they not only feel pride in their heritages, but also become more excited about history and geography and culture in general—and perhaps even learn to critique and evaluate aspects of their own past, as well as to honor them.

At the school level, avoid tracking for social studies so as to provide everyone with knowledge essential to citizenship. As more educators contemplate the social and racial implications of ability grouping, they realize the need for alternatives. Research indicates that tracked classes do not even benefit high-track students as much as once claimed, but they do discourage the lower-achieving ones. Particularly in social studies, students of various backgrounds and achievement levels benefit greatly by hearing from one another (Wynne and Malcolm 1999). This understanding strongly supports RTI approaches, which focus on providing the support students need within regular heterogeneous classrooms as much as possible.

Yes, but . . . *how can a teacher simultaneously meet the needs of students with differing achievement levels, particularly in the upper grades?*

One answer is to rethink how the classroom is organized. Traditional lectures and quizzes are least adaptable to heterogeneous grouping, offering only one version of the material for everyone. Small-group work is much more successful, as long as children are trained to take an active role. When kids talk through and argue over ideas, more learning happens. The teaching that stronger students provide for the less prepared benefits them both—the old saw being quite true, that the teacher of a subject often learns more than her students. When clusters of students need particular kinds of support, the teacher can form temporary ad hoc groups but needn't employ permanent divisions that label and segregate kids.

The other effective structure for a part of each day or week in a nontracked setting is the classroom workshop. As we describe in Chapter 2, students individually or as a group choose topics they are interested to learn about, within the content of the unit or subject. They work independently while the teacher circulates for brief one-to-one sessions where, rather than giving answers, the teacher leads students to take responsibility and solve problems themselves. In brief mini-lessons, usually at the beginning of a session, particular concepts or processes are taught, based on the curriculum or observed student needs. Near the end of the period, one or two individuals may share something they've written or created on the web, and every few weeks everyone turns in a final product.

This structure requires training for both teachers and kids. But it uses time efficiently, allows students to work at their own levels and to make choices according to their interests, and teaches responsibility, something often missing from traditional classrooms. Teachers at all grade levels, in every socioeconomic setting, have found classroom workshop highly effective.

Evaluate students' thinking and responsible citizenship, rather than focusing on decontextualized facts. Since the goal of social studies education in the national standards and many state documents is not just acquisition of information, but preparation for democratic citizenship, evaluation in social studies should relentlessly support that goal. Yes, we can ask students to show they have specific knowledge of a subject. But evaluation should also include larger questions; for example, what in the students' view constitutes a good historian (or history book, or observer of folk traditions)? How well do students gather and winnow information, take positions and build arguments, make a logical case for their interpretations? We should ask students to reflect on *how* they've learned about families or economic systems. Students should analyze the significance, implications, and human issues within the material studied. Then answers should be valued by extending discussion, rather than simply graded and forgotten.

However, for students to feel free to speak their minds, we must have many occasions when their ideas are *not* evaluated. Students should be able to express their thoughts with a sense of safety and respect. One way to balance this with assessment is to have students select the writings they will submit for evaluation out of a larger portfolio, to maintain a zone of safety for expression that is risky, tentative, or unresolved.

Finally, to mirror the democracy for which we are preparing them, students can participate in setting the standards by talking together about what makes a good paper/answer/project and how to evaluate it. In fact, the issue of meaningful evaluation of students' education is a worthy social studies topic in itself.

Additional Social Studies Resources on the Internet

Note: The range of materials available on the web is enormous. Following is a small selection of high-quality sites.

EdTechTeacher Inc. Best of History Websites. Annotated links to over 1,200 history websites and hundreds of history lesson plans and activities. Rather than compile our own list, we refer readers to this powerful web tool.
www.besthistorysites.net/

Library of Congress. Civics and Government Lesson Plans. High-quality interactive lessons (not all such websites are of this caliber).
www.loc.gov/teachers/classroommaterials/themes/civics/lessonplans.html

Mid-continent Research for Education and Learning (McREL). Lesson plans for behavioral/social sciences, civics, economics, geography, and history, at various grade levels.
www.mcrel.org/lesson-plans/index.asp

National Board for Professional Teaching Standards. Information for teachers seeking national certification—the process, benefits, and links to support groups.
www.nbpts.org

National Council on Economic Education. A collection of interactive lessons on economic concepts organized by grade level, concept, and standards.
www.ncee.net/resources/lessons.php

National Council for the Social Studies. News, research bulletins, publications, and conference information.
www.ncss.org

National Endowment for the Humanities. Edsitement History and Social Studies Lesson Plans and Websites. Many history lesson plans at various grade levels. Samples were mostly good quality, interactive.
<http://edsitement.neh.gov/lesson-plans>

National Geographic Society. Lesson plans on topics like ecology, resources, and wildlife (those we sampled were not highly creative or interactive).
www.nationalgeographic.com/xpeditions/standards/matrix.html

New York Times. The Learning Network. Resources from the *New York Times* on a range of social studies topics. Lesson plans sampled were sketchy.
<http://learning.blogs.nytimes.com/>

Smithsonian Institution. Materials on a wide variety of social studies topics on archaeology, economics, studies of war, and more. Some include virtual tours of museum exhibits, or articles and links to online copies of primary sources, and detailed lesson plans.
www.si.edu

Verizon Foundation. Thinkfinity Lesson Plans. Large number of lesson plans on a wide range of grade levels and subjects, including social studies. Sampled lessons were of good quality.
www.thinkfinity.org/lesson-plans

Recommendations on Teaching Social Studies

▲ INCREASE	▼ DECREASE
In-depth study of topics in each social studies field, in which students make choices about what to study	Cursory coverage of a lockstep curriculum that includes everything but allows no time for deeper understanding of topics
Activities that engage students in inquiry and problem solving about significant human issues	Memorization of isolated facts in textbooks
Student decision making and participation in wider community affairs, to build a sense of responsibility for their school and community	Isolation from the actual exercise of responsible citizenship; emphasis only on reading about such topics
Participation in interactive and cooperative classroom study processes that bring together students of all ability levels	Lecture classes in which students sit passively; classes in which lower-achieving students are deprived of knowledge and opportunities to learn
Integration of social studies with other areas of the curriculum; use of real-world reading	Narrowing social studies activity to include only textbook reading and test taking
Richer content in elementary grades, using children's prior knowledge. Even at a young age they've had experience that relates to psychology, sociology, economics, and political science, as well as history and geography; as well as to social institutions and problems of everyday living	Assumption that students are ignorant about or uninterested in issues raised in social studies Postponement of significant curriculum until secondary grades
Students' sense of connection with American and global history, diverse social groups, and the environment that surrounds them	Use of curriculum restricted to only one dominant cultural heritage
Inquiry about students' cultural groups and others in their school and community, thus building ownership in the curriculum	Use of curriculum that leaves students disconnected from and unexcited about social studies topics
Use of evaluation that encourages further learning and that promotes responsible citizenship and open expression of ideas	Assessments only at the end of a unit or grading period; assessments that test only factual knowledge or memorization